



State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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Sports Diplomacy in the Pacific: Developing Pacific Rugby League Elite Athletes for Diplomacy and Development

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In Brief 2016/11

Sports diplomacy is becoming an increasingly popular public diplomacy tool for governments at national, regional and international levels and for non-government organisations. Sports diplomacy involves the broad use of sport to build diplomatic relations and includes sport-for-development, that is, sport as a vehicle to achieve development outcomes. Therefore, defining what sports diplomacy is can be tricky. Murray and Pigman (2014:1100) describe sports diplomacy as a ‘theoretical and practical hybrid of two significant institutions’ with two distinct categories. The first is the intentional use of sports as an instrument of diplomacy by governments, for example the ‘[ping-pong diplomacy](#)’ that helped open United States–China diplomatic relations in the 1970s. The second is international-sport-as-diplomacy used by non-state actors. This In Brief focuses on the potential and actual use of Pacific elite athletes in supporting diplomacy and development activities in the Pacific region using the National Rugby League (NRL) as a prime example. I argue that although Pacific elite athletes are well placed to promote and publicise Pacific diplomatic sports events and development programs, the choice of athletes needs to be carefully considered and athletes should have some understanding and interest in Pacific social issues.

The use of elite athletes to support and deliver development messages and programs is not new. Governments realise that, potentially, athletes are low-risk, low-cost but high-profile ambassadors, while sporting events for public diplomacy can promote sustainability, development and dialogue. The international rugby match between Manu Samoa and the New Zealand All Blacks in Samoa 2015, for example, is considered as a historic event that has had more impact for sustaining bilateral relations between Samoa and New Zealand than any aid project. However, while athletes are often used to publicise projects in media campaigns to leverage their high profile, they are rarely involved in the design and implementation of projects or given enough relevant information to make an informed choice about what to support. This approach leaves

athletes vulnerable if projects fail and, from a sports diplomacy perspective, misses opportunities to promote effective and sustainable development outcomes and dialogue. In 2014 the NRL launched its Pacific Strategy that aims to strengthen rugby league and build stronger community ties and business with Pacific nations. This initiative can be considered as international-sport-as-diplomacy. Sonny Bill Williams and Jarryd Hayne, two very high profile Pacific rugby league athletes at the time, were used to promote the strategy. If strengthening and sustaining relationships is a goal then the choice of athletes is significant. Both Hayne and Williams left the NRL in 2014 to pursue sporting careers in other codes. It was well known that Williams would leave the code to play rugby union in 2015, and he played for the All Blacks in the Samoa match. His involvement in that match for the All Blacks overshadowed the promotion he did for the NRL Pacific Strategy in Samoa. Thus, simply choosing high-profile athletes at the time won’t necessarily achieve the desired outcomes and goals of sports diplomacy initiatives. A more considered approach is needed.

In 2015 the NRL reported that 42 per cent of their elite playing group are of Pacific island heritage (Ng Shiu and Vagana 2016). This figure alone highlights the unique position and potential of NRL Pacific athletes as diplomacy and development partners for the Australian government in the region. Recognising the importance of empowering the increasing number of Pacific athletes, Nigel Vagana, an ex-athlete and current welfare and education manager for the NRL, developed the NRL Pasifika Cultural Engagement Program in 2010 (ibid.). In the program, athletes who have been identified as having leadership potential are provided with cultural empowerment and leadership development training.

Evaluations of the Pasifika Cultural Engagement Program have shown positive outcomes for the NRL and the Pacific community. For example, a number of athletes who have participated in the program and who have recently retired are now working with the NRL. They are also willing to use their

position as successful Pacific athletes to become instruments for sports diplomacy by advocating for social issues such as domestic violence and equity in education. However, having learnt from other athletes' experiences they are also becoming more selective about the community projects and people they choose to support.

To help develop athletes to become genuine diplomacy and development partners, the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program (SSGM) together with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) delivered the NRL Leadership and Development in the Pacific training workshop in August 2015. Eleven athletes and former athletes who are now working in the NRL system were carefully selected by the NRL welfare and education managers to participate in the three-day workshop hosted by SPC at its headquarters in Noumea. Of the eleven athletes, two were women: Luisa Avaiki, a former New Zealand Kiwi Ferns captain and now an NRL development officer in Victoria, and Ruan Sims, who currently plays for the Australian Jillaroos and is also an NRL community ambassador for New South Wales. The program aimed to improve participants' knowledge of Pacific social development issues and to help develop participants to become influential leaders who can have a positive impact within their clubs and for the wider Pacific community in Australia, New Zealand and the region. The training involved a series of workshops delivered by SPC and SSGM staff on culture and history, leadership and governance, education, health, gender and sports diplomacy.

At a group level the participants were aware that Pacific athletes and staff are key stakeholders in any specific rugby league-based program in the region, including Australasia, and their perspectives should be included on any Pacific-related matters. To help facilitate better Pacific representation at governance and decision-making levels on Pacific matters the participants decided that their goal, as a Pacific collective within the NRL, is to make rugby league culturally responsible. Reaching this agreed-upon vision was a challenge and came after much debate because each participant works in a different area of the game with its own unique goals, priorities and mandates. A comment from the evaluation is illustrative: 'the group work and debates were really helpful — contributing and challenging different perspectives to achieve common direction'. At an individual level the program reinforced participants' willingness to serve their communities and elevated their awareness to look beyond their local communities and think about challenges and solutions at a Pacific regional level. One participant realised 'there is so

much more I can do for my community' and to be sensitive to the cultural needs of different community groups when developing programs.

Based on the evaluations and immediate outcomes the training workshop was a success. The NRL and SPC are now embarking on a new partnership, with NRL Pacific athletes becoming SPC ambassadors in the region. SPC will therefore be able to utilise informed NRL Pacific athletes to help develop and promote their youth and sports development programs and projects in the long term rather than for one-off media promotions à la Williams and Hayne. At an SSGM seminar about the SPC workshop, Vagana (2015) highlighted that 'SPC is pretty well respected and they do a lot of good work that I don't think enough people are aware of ... so we're happy to work together with SPC to help our Pacific community. Hopefully using our profile we can help spread their message wider.'

Sports diplomacy in the Pacific is growing. The Australian and New Zealand governments launched their new sports diplomacy strategies in 2015, and the developmental and diplomatic outcomes from the new NRL and SPC partnership will be of interest to many. Research on this partnership will not only help to ascertain its effectiveness but will also provide practical solutions and policies on how to use sports and athletes to improve diplomatic relations and development outcomes.

Author Notes

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References

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